

Writers and Their Work: No. 64

141

WYNDHAM LEWIS

by

E. W. F. TOMLIN

PUBLISHED FOR
THE BRITISH COUNCIL
and the NATIONAL BOOK LEAGUE
by LONGMANS, GREEN & CO.

Two shillings net

823.9

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WYNDHAM LEWIS was born in 1884 and for more than forty years has been widely recognized as one of the most original minds of our time. A superlative draughtsman, a painter of great distinction, it is in his other role, that of a writer, which Mr. Tomlin here considers him. Novelist, short story writer, critic, satirist, philosopher, there is no important province of literary activity to which Wyndham Lewis has not contributed.

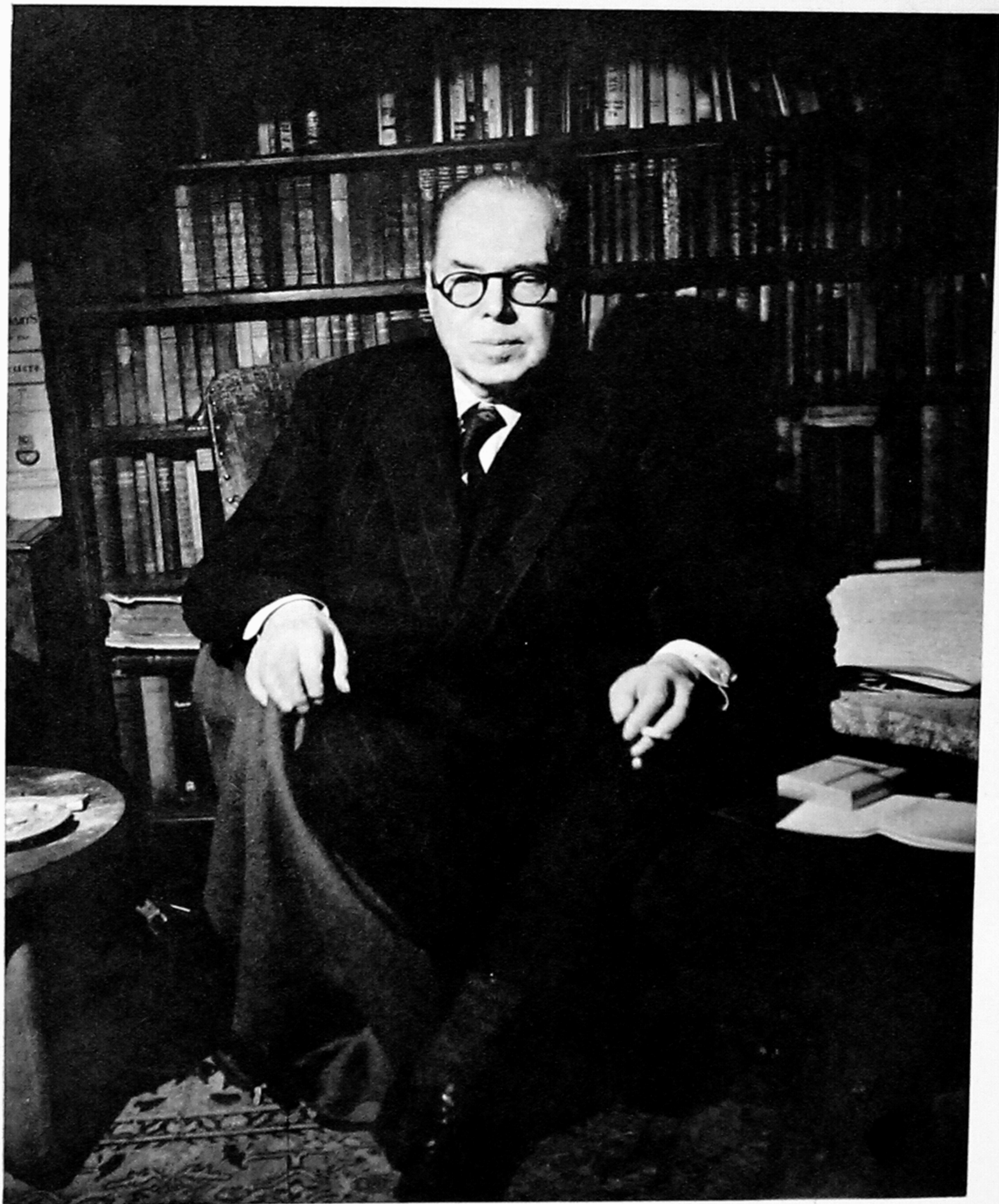
Mr. Tomlin, who has a wide and growing reputation as an interpreter of philosophic thought, will be remembered for his brilliant study of R. G. Collingwood, which appeared as No. 42 in the present series. His other books include *The Approach to Metaphysics* (1947); *The Great Philosophers: the Western World* (1950), *The Great Philosophers: the Eastern World* (1952), and *Simone Weil* (1954). What promises to be his most original work, a study of the relation between the biological sciences and metaphysics entitled *Living and Knowing*, is to be published by Faber and Faber this autumn. His essay on Wyndham Lewis forms not merely a compact and authoritative introduction but a tribute from an admirer and friend of many years' standing.

Bibliographical Series
of Supplements to 'British Book News'
on Writers and Their Work



GENERAL EDITOR
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Douglas Glass

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THE BRITISH COUNCIL
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BY LONGMANS, GREEN & CO., LONDON, NEW YORK, TORONTO

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531 Little Collins Street, Melbourne

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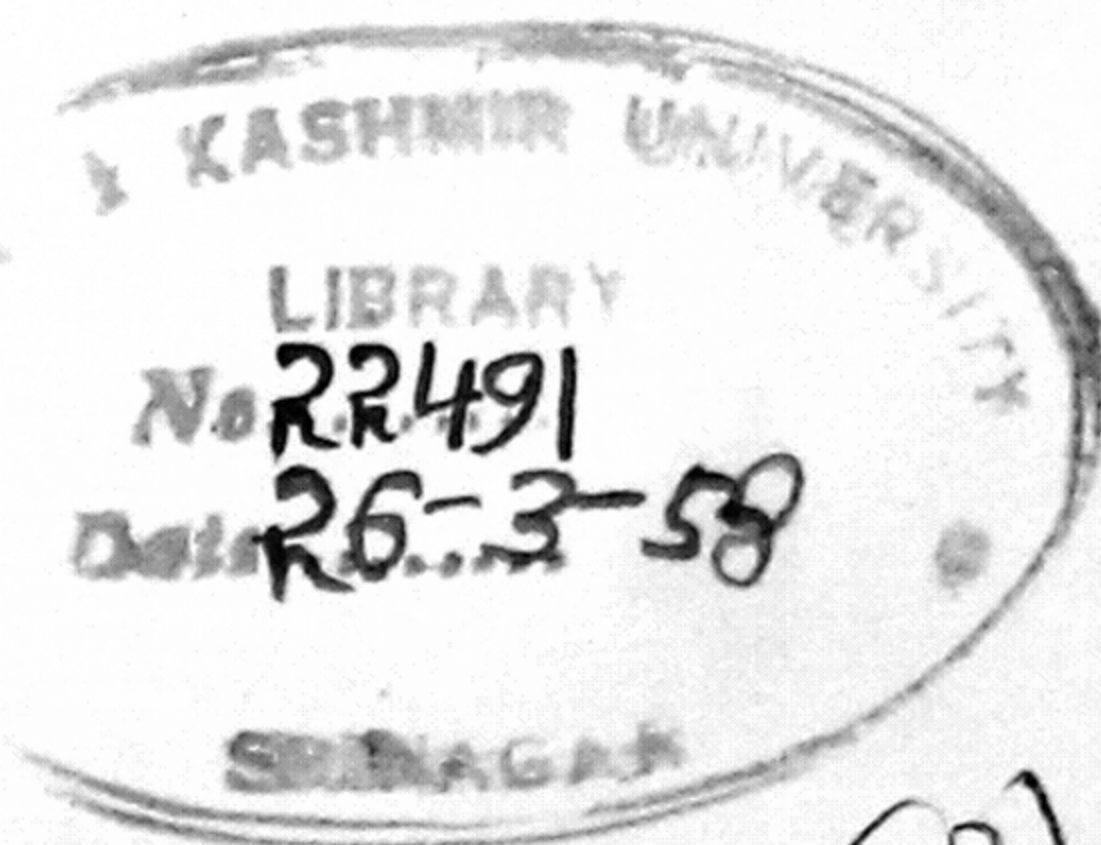
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First published in 1955

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Printed in Great Britain at The Curwen Press, Plaistow, E.13

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WYNDHAM LEWIS

What is it that men fear beyond everything?

Obviously an open person.

(*One-Way Song: Enemy Interlude*)

I

OF THE Open and the Closed Society much has been written in our day. The works of Bergson and Popper, to mention no others, have shown this to be the crucial sociological problem of the time. If there is such a thing as a truly 'open' society, however, there must be 'open' individuals to fill it. For a society is 'open' only in so far as such individuals are numerous, active, and held in esteem. Given the imperfections of all human societies, the open individual must necessarily be something of a heretic. Like Socrates, perhaps the greatest of all 'open' individuals, his impact on society will be like that of a 'gadfly'. In short, this 'friend of man' will sometimes be obliged to assume the guise of the Enemy.

The many-sided personality who forms the subject of this study may be described as an 'open' individual in every sense. In the first place, he is a writer of peculiar integrity. (It should perhaps be said at the outset that he is also a very distinguished artist.) During the whole of his career, he has been content to plough a lonely furrow, or, given his versatility, to plough several furrows at once. 'The place of honour', he has said, 'is—outside.'¹ Fearless in his expressions of opinion, he is the reverse of those superficial, pseudo-Enemies, who, seeking to attract attention by standing on their heads, remain nevertheless 'perfectly in tune with the *Zeitgeist*'.² Secondly, his mind has always been hospitable to a variety of outside influences. With his great learning and his acquaintance with many cultures, he is the least provincial

¹ *The Writer and the Absolute* (1952), p. 196.

² *Rude Assignment* (1950), p. 202.

of modern English writers. Hence his indifference to fashion, which 'introduces the parochial outlook'.¹ At a period noted for minor orthodoxies or what he calls 'inferior religions', he has steadfastly kept open house. Thirdly, the fact that 'openness' should be associated with a particular organ, the eye, is by no means an accident. Lewis is endowed with a remarkable, though disciplined, gift of vision. In his literary work no less than in his painting, the eye has played a decisive part. The hallucinatory prose of *The Childermass* and the satirical scrutiny of *The Apes of God* reveal an eye at work which surveys impartially the whole hierarchy of experience. Aristotle defined the eye as the organ most closely associated with intellectual knowledge, which 'brings to light the many differences between things'.² It is with an intellectual eye, assessing and appraising, that Lewis has chosen to view his fellow-creatures. If this explains his somewhat limited appeal to his contemporaries, it may likewise explain his capacity to outlast their short-breathed idols.

A creative writer, unless moved by considerations of pure vanity, does not desire recognition as such; what he not merely desires but needs is appreciation from those of a stature at least equal to his own. He requires worthy judges. Upon such recognition Lewis has always been able to count. Despite long neglect by the conventional critics, his genius was early hailed by such masters as Eliot, Yeats, Joyce and Pound. Not merely has he enjoyed the friendship and respect of these men, but with them he has exercised a formative influence upon his time. As this essay appears, the public for his work has shown evidence of marked expansion. Studies and monographs have appeared in Britain and America. He is already the subject of academic theses. Given these signs of wary acceptance, there is all the more need for a brief guide to his overall achievement. What sort of writer is Lewis? How should his work be approached? What are his guiding values? By which books is he likely to be remembered?

¹ *The Writer and the Absolute*, p. 148.

² *Metaphysics*, Book A.I.

The *corpus* of Lewis's work may be divided into four main categories: works of fiction and satire, works of speculative thought, works of socio-literary criticism, and 'polemics'. In the first category may be grouped *The Wild Body*, *Tarr*, *The Apes of God*, *The Enemy of the Stars*, *The Revenge for Love*, *The Vulgar Streak*, *Rotting Hill*, *Self Condemned* and (almost in a class by themselves) *The Childermass* and its successors. In the second category come the two key volumes *Time and Western Man* and *The Art of Being Ruled*. In the third category are *The Lion and the Fox*, *Men Without Art*, *The Writer and the Absolute* and the two autobiographical works. The fourth category consists of the critical and eristic works, including *The Caliph's Design*, *Paleface*, *The Diabolical Principle* and the *Dithyrambic Spectator*, *Doom of Youth*, etc. There is a fifth category, Lewis's poetry—a class of which the sole member is *One-Way Song*.¹

To suggest that these different *genres* are of equal importance, or that their author is willing to place them upon the same level, would be an error. Lewis prefers to divide his works into the formal and the informal. Of the latter he has said that 'no American President could outdo me in informality'.² Contrary to what one would suppose, there is no dissipation of energy; each category serves to reinforce the rest. Lewis has been obliged to act as his own journalist, his own compère, his own interpreter:

He has been his own bagman, critic, cop, designer,
Publisher, agent, char-man and shoe-shiner.³

For this reason each of his major works has had its group of defensive outriders.

I became a 'pamphleteer', to start with, in defence of my work as an artist. And I fail to see how an artist who is *outside* the phalansteries, sets, cells or cliques, can exist at all, if he is not prepared to

¹ This is not the only poetry Lewis has written: cf. *Rude Assignment*, Chapter XXII.

² *Twentieth Century Verse*, Wyndham Lewis Number, November 1937.

³ *One-Way Song*, XXXI.

'pamphleteer' . . . The writer or painter is isolated from the general public to an unparalleled extent at the present time.¹

Thus the novels have generated the critical studies, together with such vigorous pamphlets as *Satire and Fiction*.² *The Art of Being Ruled* has been the occasion for a whole series of minor works: books on America, on Hitler, on the Jews, on the Leftist cult, and on the character of John Bull. *Time and Western Man* is the metaphysical 'sun' around which his entire prose output has disposed itself in planetary order. In his early days, Lewis even found time to edit three spirited reviews—*Blast*, *The Tyro* and *The Enemy*—which belong to the history of what Dr. Leavis has called 'minority culture'. At a time of intellectual slump, such a well-directed stream of commentary and castigation was much needed. Today there is no organized *vie littéraire*. Moreover, the absence of a homogeneous, educated reading-public is far from made good by the existence of several distinct publics scarcely to be termed educated. Of the few persons who have succeeded in maintaining the circulation of ideas, Lewis is both the most prolific and the most original. Eliot has called him 'the greatest journalist of my time'. The description is accurate even in respect of his most serious works—if we bear in mind Ezra Pound's definition of literature as 'journalism which stays news'.

Before embarking on our survey, we may find it useful to dwell briefly upon certain characteristics of Lewis's work which have tended to bewilder, if not to alienate, certain readers. The first is his supposed *impersonality*. With this characteristic is associated a certain coldness and even inhumanity. To begin by reading his play *The Enemy of the Stars* and to follow it with a novel such as *The Apes of God* is to experience a sensation of having broken irrevocably with the 'graces' of traditional drama and fiction. In such works, the solaces or consolations of popular literature are absent. No

¹ *The Diabolical Principle* (1931), Preface, p. vii.

² Described as Enemy Pamphlet No. 1, this followed the publication of *The Apes of God* in 1930.

warm 'personality' meets the reader half-way with its bursting hold-all of humour, 'whimsicality' and good-fellowship. As *livres de chevet*, Lewis's books are hardly to be recommended. Taut and astringent, they may be prescribed in large doses for those who wish to read themselves awake. They are day-light creating. The curious paradox is this: although Lewis's books betray an apparent impersonality, the powerful personality of their author is everywhere present. On the purely verbal plane, each sentence is his and not somebody else's. There is a Lewis punch and *tournure* of phrase which no one has come near to imitating. Whereas we can 'identify' Dickens or Trollope because every few pages we light upon a typical Dickensian or Trollopean passage or scene, Lewis never thus erupts into his work. He exercises the true creative withdrawal. Pierpoint, the only 'genuine' character in *The Apes of God* (i.e. Lewis himself), never puts in an appearance during the entire 625 pages.

It may be an advantage for a great artist or writer to practise more than one art. This is a condition of keeping pure a creative imagination otherwise prone to suffer too frequent invasion from the sphere of 'personal experience'. To devote everything to one's art, as the so-called aesthetes claim to do, is to risk devoting to it the wrong things as well as the right things. The 'show business' of Shakespeare was not so much waste of energy; it permitted the canalization of an energy unparalleled in literature. That Lewis's creative energies sometimes intermix in unsatisfactory fashion we shall later suggest; but it is true in general to say that his painting, instead of depriving his writing of warmth and colour, has left his eye free to depict the 'colourlessness' and anaemia of society. If the society has not recognized itself, this would add weight to his accusation that it lacked a capacity for self-examination. Lewis's view of mankind is 'impersonal' because of the increasing depersonalization of man himself. The inhabitants of post-war 'Rotting Hill' are not even discontented with their lot. The 'indifference' displayed by the workmen who come to repair the ravages of

the dry-rot fungi is part of a general indifference to the finer values.¹

The charge of inhumanity is equally lacking in basis. The literature of *engagement*, so popular in post-war France, has given rise to a type of *littérateur* who, anxious to demonstrate his sense of social responsibility, tends to distort his art in the interests of propaganda. He bends his vision to conform to an Absolute situated outside the artistic sphere. Such wilful distortion is fatal to his professional integrity. Of the Marxian novelist this is particularly true; but it is true likewise of those authors who, like Sartre, write to illustrate a particular philosophical theory. In *The Writer and the Absolute*, Lewis has subjected this literary tendency to a particularly brilliant analysis. Sartre, Malraux, Camus, and even Orwell come under his censure. While pretending to display solicitude for man's condition, the attitude of *engagement* may end by reducing that condition to one of still greater degradation. To descend into the market-place may be only a step to descending into the farm-yard. The writer's true 'absolute' is not outside him but inside him; his absolute is truth, which 'is as necessary to everybody as the air we breathe'.² The advantage of the old-fashioned patron was that he usually left the artist to his own devices; glorification of the patron was limited to the terms of the prefatory epistle. The modern patron, whether it be the State or some public corporation or political party, exercises restraint by laying down the conditions under which the artist must work. The effects of such restraint are often extremely damaging, not least to the novelist; it is an ingenuous but common error to suppose that the creative imagination, being exempt from reference to fact, can remain free while the other faculties are enslaved. Under such subtle pressures 'a man will say a thousand things he does not wish to say, mutilate his thought, adulterate his

¹ See the story 'The Rot', *Rotting Hill* (1951).

² *The Writer and the Absolute*, p. 4. Lewis adds: 'Naturally it is much more difficult to explain why this is so. There are no lungs, pumping up and down, that correspond to it and illustrate its use.'

doctrine, compel his will to wear a uniform *against* his will, cause the characters in his books (if a novelist) to behave in a manner that turns them into other characters—to associate with people they would never speak to if allowed to follow their own sweet will'.¹ In his novel, *The Revenge for Love* (1937), Lewis employs the medium of fiction to illustrate this maleficent process at work. He writes a story about ordinary, decent human beings who, under the influence of fraudulent ideologists, are subtly changed into other people. Like many of Lewis's books, *The Revenge for Love* was in advance of its time by at least a generation: hence the neglect it suffered, and its extraordinary relevance for us today.² Behind the hard, 'pelting' prose is a concern for humanity, or rather for human values, far stronger than that which characterizes either the 'existentialist' novels or the Marxist allegories. And no one can deny humanity to the remarkable novel *Self Condemned* (1954), a work in which so many readers made their first discovery of Lewis. When critics repeat the charge of inhuman coldness, they refer perhaps to the absence in Lewis's work of something of which he is temperamentally incapable, namely sentimentality.

The question—What sort of writer is Lewis?—may therefore be answered, if only provisionally, as follows. He is a writer who has endeavoured to deploy in the service of his art all the forces of intelligence, not merely the 'sensitive' or the 'aesthetic'. Hence the importance of understanding his mind as a whole. That the human psyche can be divided into two spheres, the intellectual sphere and something vaguely called the 'sensibility', he would energetically deny. Nothing whole or integrated can issue from a split-man; Part V of *The Apes of God* is devoted to a study of that phenomenon.³

¹ *The Writer and the Absolute*, p. 121.

² Lewis's account of this neglect is contained in *Rude Assignment*, Chapter XXXVII. The character Percy Hardcastle bears an interesting resemblance to Hoederer in Sartre's play *Les Mains Sales*, which has a similar theme.

³ It is worthy of remark that Mr. Zagreus observes: 'I am afraid that all half-men are right-hand men. The heart is a superfluity' (p. 332).

Nor has Lewis entertained the view that the artist, being a specialist in the realm of feeling, is entrusted with a mission to compensate his fellows for the cold, abstract world of physical science. The artist is at the *centre*.¹ He is neither an entertainer, nor an amateur psycho-analyst, nor a propagandist—all of whom are specialists in one side of man (including his inside), and all practitioners of some form of hypnosis. The artist's rôle, by contrast, is that of eye-opener; and in the work of the greatest artists we find a capacity to 'focus', to integrate, which, in Matthew Arnold's phrase, is to see life steadily and see it whole.

The extent to which psychological theories have influenced contemporary writers and critics may be judged from the popularity between the two wars of the idea of the 'stream of consciousness'. This was regarded as providing a kind of inexhaustible spring of artistic inspiration. Identifying it as merely one aspect of the worship of 'flux' characteristic of so much popular 'philosophy', Lewis wrote *Time and Western Man* to expose the 'time cult' in all its ramifications. The book has never won recognition in philosophical circles²; but it is more orthodox in its defence of the values of intelligence than many works academically acceptable. One suspects that its influence, like that of *The Lion and the Fox*, has been more widespread than anyone has been prepared to admit. According to Lewis, this 'major concept' of our day has led to the 'coke-dream' of Surrealism, the exaltation of the naïve and the demented, the child cult, the worship of the 'dark gods' of sex, the furtive excursions into diabolism, the open advocacy of 'millennial' politics and slavery to the future, and in general to the influence of 'the dead hand of the new' so powerfully exposed in *The Demon of Progress in the Arts* (1954). Such manifestations of intellectual anarchy are rendered no less dangerous for being given a veneer of sophistication; Lewis's analysis of High Bohemia is valid, at

¹ *Time and Western Man*, Appendix to Book I, p. 137.

² An exception is *The Nature of Belief* by M. C. D'Arcy, S.J.

its best, for social groups other than the Bloomsbury satirized in *The Apes of God*.¹

When Lewis describes the intellect in *The Enemy of the Stars* as 'the traditional enemy of life', he is using the word 'life' to connote the crude biological energy which for so many artists and also for some modern philosophers is endowed with quasi-mystical significance. From the days of *Paleface* (1929), with its analysis of the life-worship of Sherwood Anderson and D. H. Lawrence, Lewis has regarded this trend of thought as symptomatic of decadence. Like the Bergsonian philosophy (or rather its vulgarization), it involves 'capitulation to the material *in struggle against which* the greatest things in the world have been constructed'.² Clearly there are degrees of life just as there are degrees of growth.

Life itself is not important. Our values make it so; but they are mostly, the important ones, non-human values, although the intenser they are the more they imply a supreme vital connotation. . . . To attach, as the humanitarian does, a mystical value to life *itself*, for its own sake, is as much a treachery to spiritual truth as it is a gesture to 'humanity'.³

In maintaining that the 'important' values are non-human, Lewis does not mean to imply that they are *inhuman*. His conception of value is based on the traditional view of the intellect as a faculty superior to reason and capable of immediate grasp of value. While the metaphysics of this view are expounded at length in *Time and Western Man*, Lewis is not advancing some aberrant doctrine peculiar to himself. He is returning to the great metaphysical tradition: a tradition preserved in the oriental wisdoms and transmitted to the western world through Aristotle (who speaks of the 'divine intellect'), and present in the scholastic thinkers, only to be

¹ The 'time-theme' is recurrent in Lewis's work. It is taken up again in the story 'Time the Tiger' in *Rotting Hill* and also in *America and Cosmic Man* (1948), Chapter XXVII.

² *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926), p. 390.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 56. cf. also *Tarr*, p. 303.

driven underground during the last few centuries. Indeed, the assault upon metaphysical thought in our day is one of the clearest, if least understood, manifestations of the time-philosophy. The intellectual intuition has given place to those sub-rational intuitions which place the 'knowing' faculty of man in his blood, his animal instincts, or his 'unconscious'. On this basis, man is allowed to 'know' only so long as his knowledge is a kind of ignorance, to 'see' only on condition that he is 'blind', and to advance only on condition that he does so somnambulistically.

So thorough and exhaustive is Lewis's analysis that the work of *Time and Western Man* will not need to be done again; fresh evidence will merely accumulate in its support. To read the book at nearly thirty years remove is to appreciate more than ever its extraordinary insight into the nature of a movement of thought of which many professional thinkers remained unconscious. (The critique of Spengler's historicism and the analysis of Behaviourism are but two examples of masterly interpretation.) Today we are more ready to admit a connection, however devious, between pure speculation in the university and the laboratory and what goes on in the public mind: the degree of deviation is itself a matter of profound interest. Not merely did Lewis demonstrate the connection; he detected the operation of forces making for increasing compromise with mass-standards and mass-emotion, above all a gradual apostasy of the intellectual élite. Such apostasy, as he saw it, followed from the nature of the philosophical ideals to which that élite subscribed. The obsession with time, movement, and change *for their own sakes* involved the wholesale abolition of distinctions, the emulsion of forms, which the intellect had struggled for centuries to establish. Even the conception of God had undergone subtle transformation; for instead of the Cause of Causes, the God of Emergent Evolution had become the Effect of Effects.¹

A lengthy treatise could be written—and no doubt is

¹ *Time and Western Man*, p. 12.

being written—on the Lewis *Weltanschauung*. It would begin by analysing the principles of Vorticism, the artistic movement which Lewis sponsored just prior to the 1914 war, with its ‘blasting’ of the provincial values of Anglo-Saxon suburban culture.¹ By means of this artistic movement—practically a one-man show—Lewis achieved something very nearly unique. Instead of importing an artistic movement from the continent twenty or thirty years after its birth, he started one on English soil. Only the Pre-Raphaelites had achieved such a thing as that. The significance of Vorticism lies not so much in what it accomplished (in fact it was killed by the 1914 war) as in the evidence it provided of Lewis’s early battles for the recognition of the artist’s place in modern society. To Lewis, the vocation of the artist is to provide an advanced-guard for the civilized intelligence. In this sense, the artist and the intellectual—or what Julien Benda has called the *clerc*—are natural allies. While modern society is not intolerant of the artist, it tolerates him only so long as he is content to remain *eccentric*. This is its subtle way of refusing to take him seriously. In such a society, the rôle of the intellectual will suffer a similar eclipse. Cut off from the creative or visionary forces, the ‘intellectuals’ will pursue their specializations in increasing isolation. The growing eccentricity of the artist will be paralleled by the increasing abstraction of the intellectual. Both will withdraw into isolated *côteries* dedicated to the cultivation of ‘an elegant sterility or cautious and critical eking out of a little jet of naïveté’.² Meanwhile the people inevitably fall victim to the apostles of claptrap. Of this serious state of affairs, Lewis wrote at length in *Men without Art* (1938). The final essay in that book, entitled ‘Towards an Artless Society’, is the more relevant for us in that we are correspondingly nearer to the consummation he describes. Nor must we be deceived by

¹ The chief Vorticist manifestos are *The Caliph’s Design* (1919) and the two numbers of *Blast* (1914, 1915). The Vortex symbol was used to imply an ‘arrest’ in the flux, and hence the idea of classic stability.

² *The Art of Being Ruled*, p. 242.

the spectacle of government subsidies to art, the proliferation of art-schools and so forth. When the State is obliged to step in, the situation must be very serious indeed.¹

Reference to the State brings us to the other major contribution of Lewis to the defence of civilized values. The key-book here is *The Art of Being Ruled*. Like *Time and Western Man*, *The Art of Being Ruled* has exerted influence in almost every sphere save that in which it might have proved most salutary; but while no work of political theory has acknowledged its merits or even its existence, the argument of the book is of permanent validity. There have been many books concerned with how to exercise power: cynical manuals such as *The Prince*, breviaries of mystical state-worship such as Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, and scientific blue-prints such as the treatise of Pareto. Few books have been concerned with how to cope with power, how to *endure* it. Writing prior to the advent of State Socialism, Lewis realized that the danger for our time was that of our being ruled out of existence. His diagnosis, like his proposed treatment, was not the conventional one. For this reason it has been either misunderstood or neglected. He fixed his eye on one phenomenon in particular, revolution. In the attitude of mind which advocated revolution for revolution's sake, he detected one more example of the time-obsession of his contemporaries. 'Extremism', he has said, 'is symptomatic of a vacuum.'² This blind worship of change is satirized in *One-Way Song*:

Our tri-classed life-express carries oh far more
Back-to-the-engine fares than those face-fore.
Gazing at yesterdays, they squat back-first—
Blind-folded into brand-new futures burst!³

Many of the apostles of this attitude, having quietly or noisily recanted, are today conventional upholders of the *status quo*.

¹ Some pertinent observations on this subject are contained in *Rotting Hill*, p. 54.

² *The Demon of Progress in the Arts*, p. 27.

³ Section IX, p. 93.

Lewis would argue that this is merely to exchange one form of convention for another; for 'revolutionary politics, revolutionary art, and, oh, the revolutionary mind is the dullest thing on earth'.¹ Admittedly, many people preached revolution out of sheer acquisitiveness and love of power. Their interest in 'revolution' was by no means disinterested; hence it was easily diverted.

If you take up a thing cynically, you drop it lightly. If *power* is what interests you, when the wind changes you change too.²

That such a disinterested advocate of the higher values should have been accused of sympathizing with authoritarian forms of government is a sad commentary on the myopia, or perhaps the malevolence, of political experts and publicists. Lewis's rejoinder forms a useful summing-up of *The Art of Being Ruled* and its outriders, and of much else besides:

My interests, in the first place, have been those of the civilised intelligence—'the politics of the intellect', as I called it. At a time when everyone was for a fanatical *étatisme*, I was not. It seemed to me to promise no good to anybody—to kick out kings and queens and put masters in their place with a hundred times their power.³

His own characteristically sardonic statement of his political position could hardly be less sectarian:

partly communist and partly fascist, with a distinct streak of monarchism in my marxism, but at bottom anarchist, with a healthy passion for order.⁴

II

From this cursory account of the theoretical basis of Lewis's work, it will be seen that we are dealing with a writer

¹ *The Art of Being Ruled*, p. 23.

² *The Writer and the Absolute*, p. 40.

³ *Rude Assignment*, p. 142.

⁴ *The Diabolical Principle* (1931), p. 126.

belonging to' no recognizable school, with few, if any, disciples, and of transparent honesty.

The artist is relieved of that obligation of the practical man to lie.¹

Except for the Vorticist 'moment', Lewis has been content to remain outside the 'literary world' in a state of 'solitary schism',² though that world has been uncomfortably aware of the 'Enemy without'. Given his isolation and the independence of his general standpoint, it is inevitable that he should have been compelled out of self-defence to cultivate the art of satire. Against folly, falsity, and above all mediocrity, moral indignation is of little use: what is needed is the satirist's probe, the weapon of deflation. Although he has given a good deal of attention to the function of satire, Lewis's views on this subject are likely to provoke some disagreement. For in declaring that 'the greatest satire is non-moral', and in arguing that the satirist is concerned to present the 'truth of natural science', he seems to leave unexplained the social efficacy of satire. There would be little sense in saying that men resembled behaviouristic puppets unless the fact were a matter of reproach. In this respect there is a recognizable change of viewpoint between *The Art of Being Ruled* and *Time and Western Man*. The former accepts man's 'instinct towards slavery' and seeks to make the best of it; the latter contends that 'people should be compelled to be freer and more individualistic than they naturally desire to be'.³ What Lewis presumably means (and certain arguments in *Satire and Fiction* confirm this) is that the satirist given to moralizing is an impure satirist; for the *moralistic* temperament, with its frequent undercurrent of hypocrisy, is among the chief targets of satire: witness *Tartuffe* and *Chadband*. Some of Lewis's fiction, including parts of *The Apes of God* and lesser works such as *Snooty Baronet*, goes so far towards presenting the 'truth of natural science' as to pass beyond

¹ *Time and Western Man*, p. 137.

² *The Enemy*, No. 1, Editorial.

³ *Time and Western Man*, p. 138.

satire altogether. In witnessing these cold dissections, one observes the operation of satire of the second degree, a satire of satire. There is no *saeva indignatio* against living objects of scorn, merely a helpless rummaging in the charnel house. These people were never alive; to dignify them with the name of puppets is to ascribe to them a flexibility they do not possess. The attempt to split Split Men still further is a futile occupation. In *The Apes of God* there is an episode which aptly illustrates this scissile process. Mr. Zagreus, the 'specialist in genius' who derives all his ideas from Pierpoint, catches sight of the 'many gaping life-like garments he was leaving behind in his room. He returned and *battered them out of human shape as far as he could.*'¹ This is the impression with which so much of *The Apes of God* leaves us.

Lewis's satire is more effective when it is allied, as so often, to the comic spirit. Indeed, Lewis's mastery of the comic has been insufficiently stressed. There are passages in *The Apes of God* itself, in *Blasting and Bombardiering* (the accounts of James Joyce and T. E. Hulme, for instance), in *The Vulgar Streak*, in *Rude Assignment* and even in *America I presume*, which are as uproarious as anything in the early Evelyn Waugh and the younger set of comic writers. This blend of unflinching observation, irony and lampooning is present in his earliest work; and it is convenient to introduce the imaginative prose by way of the stories in which this combination is seen in its early perfection, namely *The Wild Body*. These stories, dating from 1909, contain almost the whole of Lewis. Only Lewis the visionary is missing; he emerges first with *The Childermass* (1928). Perhaps the most convincing argument for crediting Lewis not merely with talent but with genius is the fact of his *precocious maturity*. Such stories as 'Bestre', 'The Cornac and his Wife' and 'Brotcotnaz' are little masterpieces; and Lewis has provided a valuable commentary on their meaning and construction in the essays 'Inferior Religions' and 'The Meaning of the Wild Body'.

¹ p. 345 (my italics).

The root of the comic (he writes) is to be sought in the sensations resulting from the observations of a thing behaving like a person. But from that point of view all men are necessarily comic; for they are all things, or physical bodies, behaving as persons. . . . The movement or intelligent behaviour of matter, any autonomous movement of matter, is essentially comic.¹

Like so many of Lewis's *aperçus*, this remark goes to the root of the matter. That philosophers such as Bergson and Kierkegaard should have reflected deeply upon the nature of the comic is significant: for the comic is an integral element in the 'human situation'. Life is a compromise—a compromise between what is conventionally called soul and body, nature and spirit; and since all compromises are both provisional and rough-and-ready, there is something inherently comic about an organism engaged in trying to be a person or a 'spirit'. There is also something pathetic; we know how easily the clown, by the merest gesture, can draw tears as well as laughter. Once the delicate balance of comedy is disturbed, however, the result is either a repellent hardness or mawkishness. By depicting some of his characters as complete automata, Lewis tends to alienate us; but the inhabitants of the Pension Beau Séjour, Francis the wandering musician, Bestre, and above all the Cornac and his wife, impoverished Breton travelling entertainers who bear a savage grudge against their village patrons, are genuine comic characters who arouse pity as well as amusement. A passage from the latter story is worthy of reproduction as embodying, in addition to comedy, the chief virtues of Lewis's narrative manner:

After my evening meal I strolled over the hill bisected by the main street and found him in his usual place in a sort of square, one side of which was formed by a stony Breton brook, across which went a bridge. Drawn up under the beeches stood the brake. Near it in the open space the troupe had erected the trapeze, lighted several lamps (it was dark already) and placed three or four benches in the narrow

¹ *The Wild Body*, p. 246.

semicircle. When I arrived, a large crowd already pressed around them.

'Fournissons les bancs, Messieurs M'dames! fournissons les bancs et alors nous commençons!' the proprietor was crying.

But the seats remained unoccupied. A boy in tights, with his coat drawn round him, shivered at one corner of the ring. In the middle of this the showman several times advanced, exhorting the coy Public to make up its mind and commit itself to the extent of sitting down on one of his seats. Every now and then a couple would. Then he would walk back, and stand near his cart, muttering to himself. His eyebrows were hidden in a dishevelled frond of hair. The only thing he could look at without effort was the ground, and there his eyes were usually directed. When he looked up they were heavy—vacillating painfully beneath the weight of their lids. The action of speech with him resembled that of swallowing: the dreary pipe from which he drew so many distressful sounds seemed to stiffen and swell, and his head to strain forward like a rooster about to crow. His heavy under-lip went in and out in sombre activity, as he articulated. The fine natural resources of his face for inspiring a feeling of gloom in his fellows, one would have judged irresistible on that particular night. The bitterest disgust disfigured it to a high degree.

But *they* watched this despondent and unpromising figure with glee and keen anticipation. . . . When the furious man scowled they gaped delightedly; when he coaxed they became grave and sympathetic. All his movements were followed with minute attention. When he called upon them to occupy their seats, with an expressive gesture, they riveted their eyes on his hand, as though expecting a pack of cards to suddenly appear there. They made no move at all to take their places. Also, as this had already lasted a considerable time, the man who was fuming to entertain them—they just as incomprehensible to him as he was to them from that point of view—allowed the outraged expression that was the expression of his soul to appear more and more in his face. . . .

His cheerless voice, like the moaning bay of solitary dogs, conjured them to occupy the seats. 'Fournissons les bancs!' he exhorted them again and again. Each time he retired to the position he had selected to watch them from, far enough off from them to be able to say that he had withdrawn his influence, and had no further wish to interfere. Then, again, he stalked forward. This time the exhortation was pitched in as formal and matter-of-fact a key as his anatomy

would permit, as though this were the first appeal of the evening. Now he seemed to be merely waiting, without discreetly withdrawing—without even troubling to glance in their direction any more, until the audience should have had time to seat themselves—absorbed in briefly rehearsing to himself, just before beginning, the part he was to play. These tactics did not alter things in the least. Finally, he was compelled to take note of his failure. No words more issued from his mouth. He glared stupidly for some moments at the circle of people, and they, blandly alert, gazed back at him.

Then unexpectedly, from outside the periphery of the potential audience, elbowing his way familiarly through the wall of people, burst in the clown. Whether sent for to save the situation, or whether his toilet was just completed, was not revealed.

'B-o-n soir, M'sieurs et M'dames' he chirruped and yodeled, waving his hand, tumbling over his employer's foot. The benches filled as if by magic. But the most surprising thing was the change in the proprietor. No sooner had the clown made his entrance, and, with his assurance of success as the people's favourite, and comic familiarity, told the hangers-back to take their seats, than a brisk dialogue sprang up between him and his melancholy master. It was punctuated with resounding slaps at each fresh impertinence of the clown. The proprietor was astonishing. I rubbed my eyes. This lugubrious personage had woken to the sudden violence of a cheerful automaton. In administering the chastisement his irrepressible friend perpetually invited, he sprang nimbly backwards and forwards as though engaged in a boxing match, while he grinned appreciatively at the clown's wit, as though in spite of himself nearly knocking his teeth out with delighted blows. The audience howled with delight . . .¹

The story which presents the 'eye' at its most keenly inquisitive is 'Bestre', which is itself the story of an Eye. Bestre is a character whose tyrannical power over his neighbours resides precisely in the power of that organ. ('At the passing of an enemy Bestre will pull up his blind with a snap.') No wonder the young Lewis, disguised under the sobriquet Kerr-Orr and dubbing himself the Soldier of Humour, can write of his encounters in pre-1914 Brittany that 'I learnt a great deal from Bestre. He is one of my

¹ The Cornac and his Wife (*The Wild Body*).

masters.¹ The eye is essentially a primitive organ; man observed the world before he could appraise it in speech. The cave-painting is the earliest example of creative energy. This primitive energy surges through all Lewis's work. He has been well described as combining 'the thought of the modern and the energy of the cave-man'.² Energy by itself is not the same as creativity; it must be transmuted and refined. In Lewis, the transformation is a continuous process; one feels the tension in his prose, a straining, cajoling restless medium, eddying and billowing, yet suggestive of astonishing depths and moving to controlled rhythms. The control is that which distinguishes such writing both from the 'folk prose' of popular fiction and from the 'idiot-yawp' prose of the new school of violence. The Soldier of Humour thus describes himself:

My body is large, white and savage; but all the fierceness has been transformed into laughter. . . . I move on a more primitive level than most men, I expose my essential me quite coolly, and all men shy a little. This forked, strange-scented, blond-skinned gut-bag, with its two bright rolling marbles with which it sees, bull's-eyes full of mockery and madness, is my stalking-horse. *I hang somewhere in its midst operating it with detachment.*³

What Lewis can do in verse is revealed throughout *One-Way Song*, where the method is used in illustration of the method itself:

Swept off your feet, be on the look out for the pattern,
It is the chart that matters—the graph is everything!
In such wild weather you cannot look too closely at 'em—
Cleave to the abstract of this blossoming.⁴

Laughter of this kind is therapeutic; it is 'the mind sneezing', though 'occasionally it takes on the dangerous form of absolute revelation'. Finally, such laughter, which is the

¹ An up-to-date but kindlier Bestre is Mr. Patricks, the 'pocket-Selfridge' of Rotting Hill ('Mr. Patricks' Toy Shop', *Rotting Hill*).

² T. S. Eliot, reviewing *Tarr* in *The Egoist* (1917).

³ *The Wild Body*, p. 5 (my italics).

⁴ 'The Song of the Militant Romance', p. 6.

laughter of Aristophanes, Chaucer, and Rabelais, remains indifferent to the passage of time.

Laughter does not progress. It is primitive, hard, unchangeable.¹

The most sustained feats of prose in this manner—with laughter in recess, as it were—are those contained in *The Childermass* (1928) and *The Apes of God*, both works of epic proportions. For the reasons given, *The Apes of God* is hardly a success as a novel; the objection to calling it a failure is that we have no clear idea of how, given its structure, it could have succeeded. While it might be possible to compose a mock-epic of Bloomsbury after the manner of *The Rape of the Lock*, the task of engaging in this 'massacre of the insignificants' was perhaps a thankless one. The 'fantastic tricks' of these apes are hardly calculated to 'make the angels weep'; all they induce is a passing sneer. It is only when Lewis is satirizing permanent human foibles that his full powers are called into play. The beginning of *The Apes of God*, like most of Lewis's openings, is superb. Rarely has the vanity and pretentiousness of old age been more ruthlessly pilloried than in this scene of a rich dowager at her toilet. In Swift there is nothing like it: Aldous Huxley's attempt at the same theme in *Those Barren Leaves* is by comparison trivial. It will be observed how the meticulous description of a few movements—the maid at work on the coiffure, 'carding' the hair 'until the large false-teeth rattled in the horse-like skull', and the laborious seating of the *grande dame* in her chair—serve to lay bare the secrets of a whole society:

When they were near the rear of the chair, they took a course at a tangent, then tacked, passing around its left arm. They entered the spotlight shot in a shaft computed to be ninety million miles from the solar projector—so stupendously aloft, in its narrow theatre, from this human performance. She lowered her body into its appointed cavity, in the theatrical illumination, ounce by ounce—back first, grappled to Bridget, bull-dog grit all out—at last riveted as though by suction within its elastic crater, corseted by its

¹ *The Wild Body*, p. 237.

mattresses of silk from waist to bottom, one large feeble arm riding the soft billows of its substantial fluted brim.¹

Two years before the publication of *The Apes of God*, an imaginative work of very different quality had begun to take shape in the first section of *The Childermass*. Its initial impact was slight. Although the finished work was promised almost immediately, the interval between Part I and its completion was finally protracted to twenty-seven years. Lewis's activities in the intervening period were multifarious: the thirties and the war years saw a renewed output of painting. His enthusiasm for this potential masterpiece of visionary literature seemed to have waned to the point at which resumption of work would have proved artistically impossible. Moreover, in the years following the Second World War, and sadly interrupting a prolific period of art-criticism, Lewis's sight began to fail. The paint brushes were laid aside; but the pen, moving over huge sheets of paper resting on a drawing-board smoothed to the colour of amber, produced a series of volumes in which *The Childermass* was not merely continued but built into a work surpassing in quality anything that its author can have originally conceived. At the time of writing, a composite volume containing *Monstre Gai* and *Malign Fiesta* is complete, while the concluding volume, *The Trial of Man*, is in course of composition. Brought to its expected climax, the whole cannot but form one of the most prodigious imaginative creations of the present century, perhaps the only great work to come out of the Cold War, and the climax of Lewis's literary career.

The action (if it can be called such) of *The Childermass* takes place on an arid steppe outside heaven. Humanity, an 'emigrant mass', is assembled 'in a shimmering obscurity' to undergo examination by an extraordinary figure—half man, half dwarf—called the Bailiff. Following the examination, the individuals are deemed fit or otherwise for admission to the 'magnetic city'. In the course of the slow unfolding of

¹ Prologue, 'Death the Drummer', p. 23.

the scene, the Bailiff's authority is challenged by an obscure figure of which the name Macrobian is the only clue to his identity that we possess. Finally, there is another group of personages, the Hyperideans, into whose mouths Lewis puts a series of lengthy speeches concerned with the perennial problems which have always interested him. Adequately to describe the theme of the book is as difficult as to sum up in as many words *Paradise Lost* or *Arabia Deserta*. *The Childermass* is a cineramic dream which enjoys no reality outside itself. (When the Bailiff reappears in *One-Way Song* he is another figure, his magic gone, like Mr. Pickwick in *Master Humphrey's Clock* (III).) Lewis has spoken of the kind of writing in which the word melts upon the page.¹ In *The Childermass*, by contrast, the words, issuing in molten form from some subterranean foundry ('the intellect has its workshop underground'²), settle and form durable patterns. There are few works in which the sense of *stasis* is more remarkably achieved. Released from servitude to the time-series, we are assisting at some archetypal ritual in which nature itself is an active agent:

The western horizon below the ridge, where the camp ends inland, but southward from the high road, is a mist that seems to thunder. A heavy murmur resembling the rolling of ritualistic drums shakes the atmosphere. It is the outpost or investing belt of Beelzebub, threatening Heaven from that direction, but at a distance of a hundred leagues, composed of his resonant subjects. Occasionally upon a long-winded blast the frittered corpse of a mosquito may be borne. As it strikes the heavenly soil a small sanguine flame bursts up and is consumed or rescued. A dark ganglion of the bodies of anopheles, mayflies, locusts, ephemerids, will sometimes be hurled down upon the road; a whiff of plague and splenic fever, the diabolic flame and the nodal obscenity is gone.³

This is the hallucinatory world of Yeats's *Byzantium* and of the 'City over the mountains' of Eliot's *Waste Land*, which

¹ *Rotting Hill*, p. 63 ('The Bishop's Fool').

² *One-Way Song*, XXIV.

³ *The Childermass*, p. 1.

'cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air'; but the effect is achieved by images derived from the several senses, not of sight alone. The comparison with *Ulysses* is inevitable, though misplaced. Apart from the fact that Joyce's method is often satirized in *The Childermass*, Lewis is not concerned to provide an equivalent to 'the stream of consciousness' (which he has called a barbarian technique¹). The stream has been reduced to a trickle—hence the conversational trivialities that abound—and we are shown rather the hard pebbled bed, the 'truth of geological science', that supports it. An illusion dear to man in his decadence is the belief that an impoverished consciousness may be enriched by an uprush of 'unconscious' vitality. As a chthonic creature, man hopes to be born again from the same womb, as if its fertility were permanently assured. He wishes to be either pure organism or pure spirit; but he is condemned to be man. To suggest that the 'metaphysics' of the *Childermass* tetralogy takes this form is not perhaps fanciful. Pulley and Satters, the two protagonists whose adventures continue throughout the series, remain human beings; 'we behave as though we were now what we used to be, in life'.² But they are beings for whom death has effected little change in a consciousness that never enjoyed more than rudimentary vitality. Death is merely a continuation of their dead-and-aliveness. (This even applies to Pulley, who in life was a well-known writer.) They are *innocent* of thought: and *Childermass* is the name for the Festival of the Innocents.

You need not fancy your reason's going; you haven't got any.³

To one of the questions in the mock-examination:

State whether in life you were Polytheist, Pantheist, Atheist, Agnostic, Theist or Deist—

Pulley advises his bewildered and uncomprehending companion to write down 'None of these'. It is as good an answer as any.

¹ *Satire and Fiction*, p. 53.

² *The Childermass*, p. 70.

³ *The Childermass*, p. 61.

The criticism has been levelled at *The Childermass*, as it is likely to be preferred against the subsequent volumes, that the whole panoply of supernatural judgement lacks meaning, even acrostic meaning. Where and what is the 'moral' behind it? A careful study of the work shows that the meaning is there; but as a creative artist, Lewis does not break the imaginative spell by obtruding it. He is not writing crude allegory, nor is he preaching a disguised sermon, like Charles Williams or C. S. Lewis. An important clue may be found in the elaborate description of the grotesque court in which the Bailiff conducts his business. The 'Punch and Judy' structure in which he sits is adorned with a variety of occult signs, chief among them being the symbol of the *Maha-Yuga*. Now the *Maha-Yuga* is the name in Vedanta doctrine for a complete cycle of history. Divided into four separate *Yugas*, it implies the successive decline in human righteousness, culminating in the *Kali-Yuga* in which righteousness reaches its nadir. The representation of the 'goat-hoof' underneath the sign in question, together with the recurrent imagery of the serpent's head (repeated on the Bailiff's banner in *Monstre Gai*) seems to imply that the world brought to judgement has reached its final phase. Man is in hell, 'without dignity, without tragedy'¹; and part of his hell is the dim apprehension that the conventional notions of salvation and damnation have been reduced to trivial farce. Since a good deal of this first volume is occupied with serio-comic *badinage* on theological and philosophical themes, the reader may be impatient for some action. This is provided in abundance throughout the next two volumes, in which (among other events) the Third City is subjected to infernal raids on a cosmic scale, emissaries arrive from different regions on the universe, an angelic uprising is suppressed, and we are afforded horrifying glimpses of hell itself. This hell is the more terrible in that it forms a kind of inverted Welfare State, presided over by Sammael, the Devil, who is portrayed

¹ Ezra Pound, *Cantos*, XIV. The 'Infernal Preliminary' of *Monstre Gai* (VI) underlines this fact very clearly.

as a puritan intellectual weary of his long tenure of office and anxious to resign it. In the succeeding volume, *Malign Fiesta*, the impression of nightmare reaches its climax. In contrast to the 'good fellowship' hells of modern secular imagination, Dis is shown to be a place of inexorable punishment; and the public may experience no little shock to find the inhabitants of hell behaving as fiendishly to their victims as the inhabitants of earth. Despite the originality and complexity of the theme, the writing is smoother and swifter than that of *The Childermass* (the puzzling *longueurs* are absent), and we put down these extraordinary volumes anxious, in every sense, to learn their outcome.

III

The great merit of the *Childermass* series is that its theme grows progressively more articulate. Everything is in due time subordinated to the central imaginative purpose, so that it is likely to prove Lewis's most integrated and proportioned work. What has happened is that Lewis has at last freed himself to be a creative writer. Whereas in his painting he slowly moved away from extreme and sterile abstraction, he has observed in his writing a contrary discipline: the interest in concrete political and sociological problems, though undiminished, has decreasingly invaded his fiction. Where the invasion persists, as in some of the *Rotting Hill* stories, the artistry is impaired. *Self Condemned*, his most impressive performance in straight novel-writing, begins successfully to hold the reader the moment the over-long political explanations are put aside. The drama of 'the Room', where the impoverished exiled couple learn the meaning of subsistence, remains of permanent significance; and the tragedy which follows the break-up of the primitive community is most movingly done. This note of high seriousness, which is first sounded in *The Revenge for Love*, seems to stem from a deepening insight into human nature, or perhaps

from a break in the reticence for which the author is noted. In an early work such as *Tarr*, the characters, though more real than those of *The Apes of God* and *Snooty Baronet*, do not fundamentally excite our interest. Kreisler is made to hang himself because he must somehow be got out of the novel; it is a desperate way of making him a 'living' character. But Hester's suicide in *Self Condemned* is something that *she* does almost in spite of the author. The book has by that time taken control; it is in full flight from its creator—a flight beginning with the powerful description of the burning hotel and ending with the 'white world' of the hospital; after which Lewis, catching up, ends the story with a university appointment for his Professor and extinguishes our interest.

It is possible to contend that Lewis's preoccupation with men as automata, having no inside and presenting a façade to the world, was derived in part from his revolt as a painter against the theory and practice of Impressionism. 'The ossature is my favourite part of a living animal organism, not its intestines', he writes;¹ and in both *Paleface* and the *Dithyrambic Spectator* he praises the kind of art in which hardness and firm outline predominate. In *Men Without Art*, he defends his 'external' approach to his characters, especially in *The Apes of God*; but while it is one thing to portray men as 'machines governed by mere routine' (for a machine has no 'inside'), it is another to maintain that they *are* machines.² Lewis seems to have passed through a period of extreme disillusion in which human beings seemed to him to be wholly deprived of what is conventionally called 'inner life': his unpublished novel *The Roaring Quean* seems to have pushed this notion to its extreme conclusion of utter negativity. He may have been nearer the truth when, in an early essay, he declared that 'the world is in the strictest sense asleep, with

¹ *Satire and Fiction*, p. 51. Some of the material of this pamphlet was used later in *Men Without Art*.

² The quotation is from Hazlitt, writing of Ben Jonson. Lewis defends its application to satire in *Satire and Fiction*, p. 45.

rare intervals and spots of awareness. It is almost the sleep of the animal or insect world.'¹ And in a curiously interesting passage in *Self Condemned*, he takes up this theme of the essential mystery of human consciousness:

The polar bear was mad, he was obsessed with being a polar bear; and many men were pretty mad also, incapable of looking at themselves from the outside. No one could imagine why man had abstracted himself and acquired the sanity of consciousness, why he had gone sane in the midst of a madhouse of functional character.²

It is as if Lewis realized that the capacity to look at oneself 'from the outside' can be done only from 'inside', and that without the cultivation of this inner capacity, human existence would remain what it so often is, 'a nightmare staged in a menagerie'.³

If we have repeatedly reverted to Lewis's ideas, it is because a writer's ideas are of fundamental importance. The day is past when it was thought virtuous in an imaginative writer to have nothing particular to say, and rank betrayal for him to presume to think. Once the apostles of 'form' begin to talk about 'significant form', they cease to be pure formalists. All great writers are preoccupied ultimately with philosophical issues. It does not necessarily make a man a greater writer to cultivate, like Lewis, his own ideas rather than other people's; but there are epochs, of which the present is one, in which the establishment of an 'ideal' background is a condition of being a writer of any stature at all. Background it must be; we do not admire a novel in proportion as it resembles *The World of William Clissold*. But a book which fails to illuminate our experience, or at best to add to it, cannot lay claim to purely artistic value in any rational sense of art; and such illumination must derive from an inner source of light, which is ultimately the author's sense of value—we say 'sense', for there need be no explicit formulation.

¹ 'Tyronic Dialogues' (*The Tyro*, 1921-2).

² *Self Condemned*, p. 202.

³ 'Tyronic Dialogues.'

To prophesy concerning literary reputations is proverbially dangerous; but it is not impossible that the works of Joyce, for all their technical brilliance, will end by being classed among the 'Curiosities of Literature', to be assembled by a future Disraeli the Elder, while those of Lewis, regarded as curiosities by his contemporaries, will retain their interest and their artistry for later generations. The work of the Enemy both constructive and critical is not confined to one life-span. It may be of special relevance to epochs in which the Enemy-figure is less and less tolerated.

Such survival other than for the benefit of students of literary history must naturally depend upon technical accomplishment of a high order. In concluding this essay, we may usefully devote some attention to Lewis's technique, or rather to his various techniques. To maintain that Lewis has restored to English prose something of the vitality associated with the Elizabethans is a commonplace. His deep reading in Elizabethan literature is evident from a work of which much could be written, *The Lion and the Fox*. Nash is an obvious influence: Lewis has the same gusto, the same gossipy run of words, something of the same humour.¹ But although Lewis's reading in several fields has been enormous—or perhaps because of that—we cannot enumerate the influences he has undergone; his basic technique in both words and paint seems to have been ready-to-hand at the moment of beginning work. This is not to say that his work shows no relaxation of tension; some of the smaller pamphlets such as *The Old Gang and the New Gang* (an attempt to expose the fallacy of 'the great blank of the missing generation') betray the impression that their author wished to clear them out of the way as speedily as possible. The remarkable fact is that Lewis has in course of time so disciplined his creative powers as to be able, once faced with a particular task, to write as if his sole speciality were the genre in question. Whereas *The Art of Being Ruled* and *Time and Western Man* are 'tank'

¹ Cf. Michael Ayrton's Introduction to Nash's *Unfortunate Traveller* (1948), and Walter Allen's *The English Novel*, p. 25 (1954).

books into which he discharges the whole variegated content of his mind, a novel such as *The Vulgar Streak* is almost perfect in its execution.

Apart from the satirico-comical and visionary talent of which examples have been given, Lewis excels most of his contemporaries in at least three kinds of writing. These are selected not so much on account of their originality as because they are rarely exhibited to perfection today. (It would be tempting to enumerate some of Lewis's other gifts: his genius for names, his sense of pageantry, and his remarkable ability to depict Anglican clergymen.) The first is that of *invective*. In this manner he is never personal, never scurrilous, and never merely rhetorical; 'the Soldier of Humour is chivalrous, though implacable'.¹ The assault on the 'Steinstutter' (the prose of Gertrude Stein) in *Time and Western Man*; on the literary cult of 'wickedness' in *The Diabolical Principle* and *Men without Art* (especially the passage on Oscar Wilde); and on upper-class radicalism in *The Revenge for Love*, are magnificent denunciations of stupidity, fraud and falsity. The second is best described as 'sociological analysis'—a technique in which he has had a large number of imitators. Many examples could be given; but a passage from his entertaining account of North African travel is worth citing (he is describing the shooting of a typical 'desert love' film):

It occurred to me as I watched these film-cattle that the stage-actor, whose work is done upon a stage, and the film-actor, the backgrounds for whose work are the scenes of everyday, though they have much in common, must differ very widely in important particulars. The stage-actor for instance can always be spotted out of the theatre, in his non-public life. Likewise the film-actor, but less so. For on the whole with the latter the actorishness must be of a more insidious sort. His artificiality has to be more intense, since the demands of the *real* everyday background are more exacting. In his professional displays the screenworker in the nature of things is the last word in *naturalism*, at the opposite pole to formal art. His actorishness therefore (the stigmata of the trade of the Makebelieve

¹ *The Wild Body*, p. 63.

stamped into his features and attitudes) must be rather a distortion of a very common-or-garden norm, rather than the reflections of a transcendent, an abnormal, existence. The Film-man will tend to be a very intense, very slightly heightened Everyman; whereas the Garricks and Irvings would carry about with them in private the impress of successions of great Individuals of the Imagination—separated by all the arts of the formal stage-play from that everyday nature of Everyman, which is the particular province of Film-photography.¹

The third form, which is obviously related to the general descriptive capacity, is the rendering of trivial experience with an objective fidelity that causes a shock of surprised recognition. This might be called the idealization of banality, and it is here that the 'external' approach achieves its best results. The effect, as this brief episode in a crowd shows, is more revealing than that of the 'interior monologue':

At his side a man started. He could feel the next body turning upon him. As part of the same system his own trunk revolved, as well, a little. . . . There was another turn of the screw. He allowed himself to be revolved half-left, until a magnified jaw, upon the opposite side, came into action, a half-inch from his profile. As the teeth shattered a luncheon biscuit, a mild cerulean eye was dragged open by the rumination in a startled cow's sidelong stare, and slid shut.²

Difficult as Lewis may be to classify, he represents the kind of figure who appears every so often, though not perhaps often enough, in the English tradition. There are certain analogies with Blake. While no two temperaments appear so different, Blake's social isolation, his struggle for the recognition of his art, his pungent pamphleteering, his 'ready-made' genius, and finally his 'openness', are characteristics which Lewis shares. Admittedly Lewis has not been accustomed to meet Isaiah on Rotting Hill as Blake encountered him frequently in South Molton Street. But we can well imagine Blake illustrating the grotesque figures of Hanp and

¹ *Filibusters in Barbary* (1932), p. 94.

² *The Apes of God*, Part II, p. 75.

Arghol in *The Enemy of the Stars*; and some of that drama as well as parts of *The Childermass* reads strangely like the Prophetic Books. Another 'unclassifiable' figure with certain resemblances to Lewis is Samuel Butler; but Butler, notwithstanding his contemporary rôle of Enemy, opposed the assumptions of his day with ideas scarcely less superficial, as the long sterile Shavian discipleship proved. While Lewis has all Butler's intelligence, he possesses something which Butler lacked, a capacity to transcend his *milieu* and likewise to transcend his time. (It is to another Samuel Butler that Lewis shows real affinity: *One-Way Song*, 'driving its coach-and-four through the strictest of hippical treatises', is in the style of *Hudibras*.) It is this breadth of vision which makes Lewis not so much an 'intellectual' (though he is proud to call himself one) as that almost extinct figure, a *savant*. Finally, with his directness, his hatred of the pliant and the vague (no 'modernist' is less 'obscure'), he may be pronounced an essentially masculine writer. This is not to place him among the Hemingways or the Malrauxs, whose virility—given the composition of the novel-reading public—is often suspect; it is to suggest that the power of his imaginative work depends for its stimulus upon what he has called 'the male chastity of thought'.¹ Being a man of many disguises, we can continue to expect from him the unexpected. The affliction of recent years has done nothing to curtail the power of his invention. This last disguise may permit an even greater freedom, and a new access of power.

Pushed into an unlighted room, the door banged for ever, I shall . . . have to light a lamp of aggressive voltage in my mind to keep at bay the night.²

¹ *Time and Western Man*, p. 7.

² 'The Sea-Mists of the Winter' (*The Listener*, 10 May 1951).

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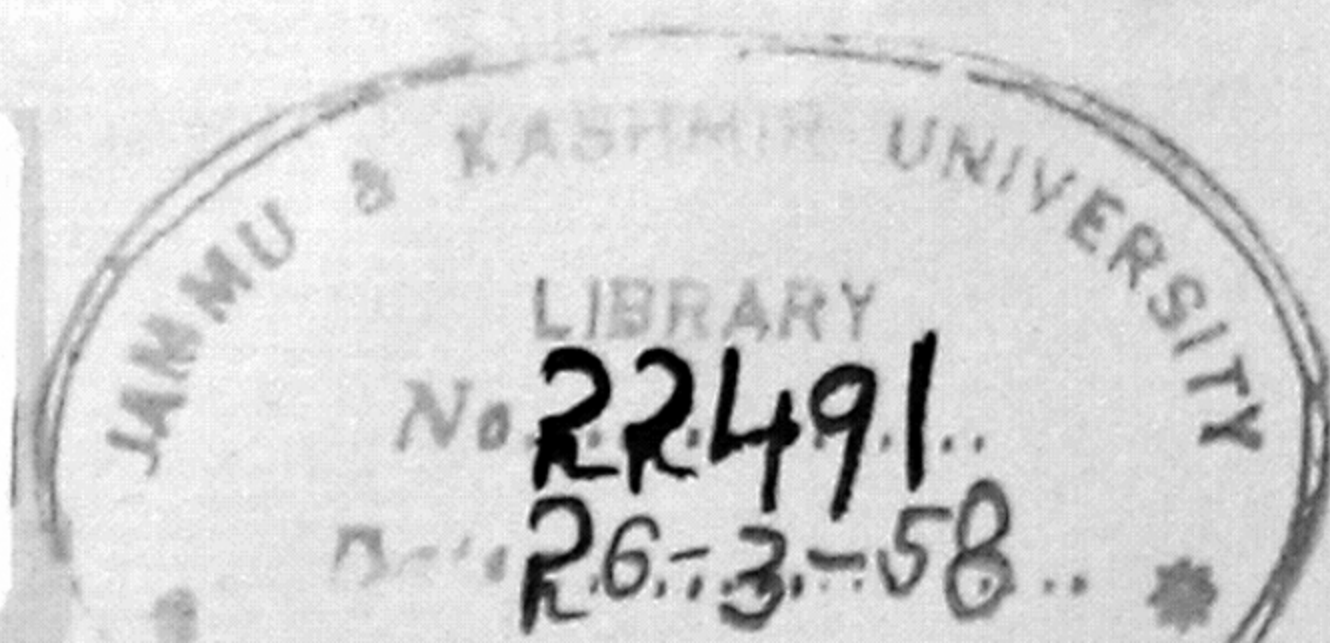
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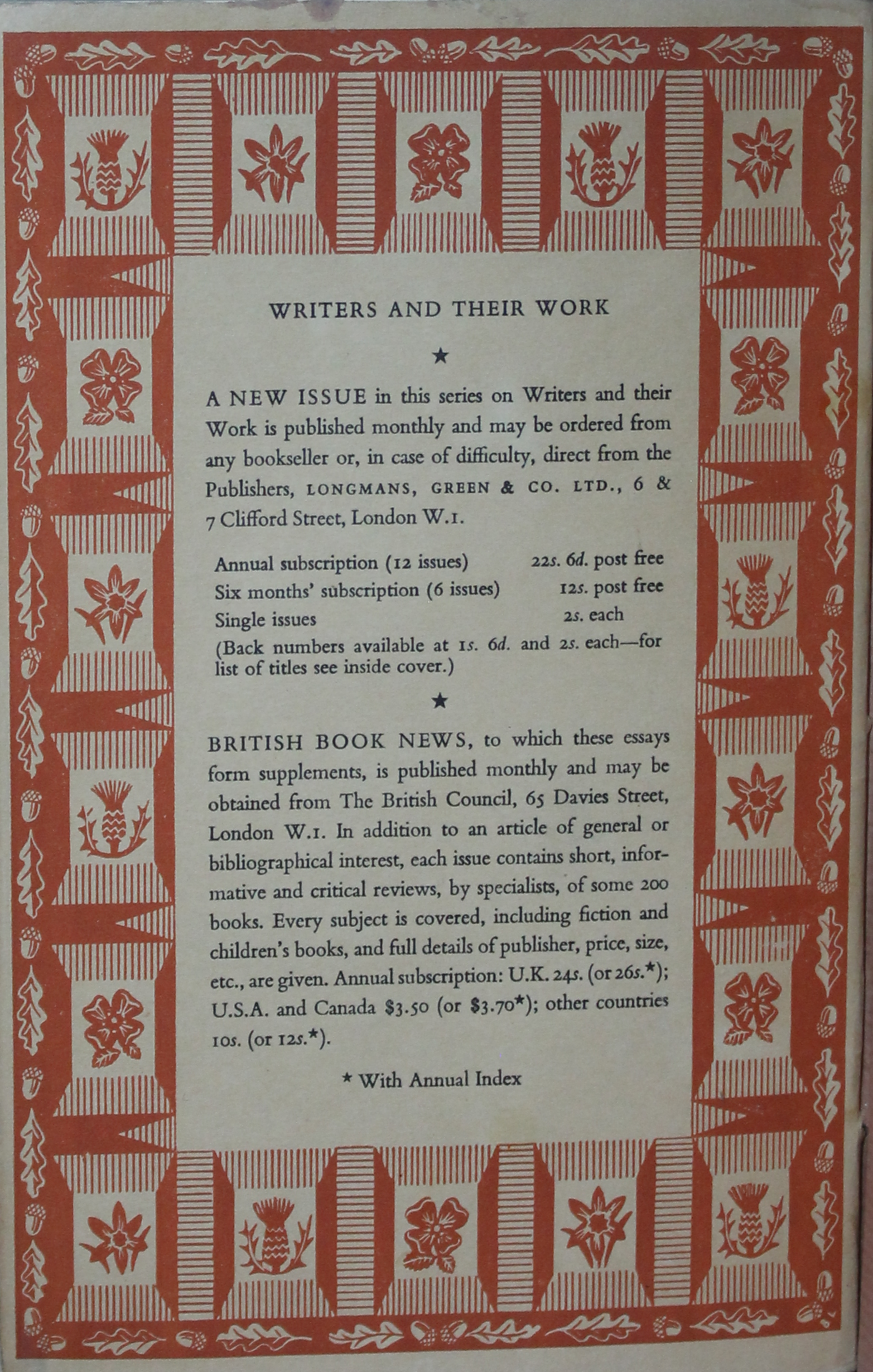
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